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ABSTRACT

The non-traditional student, or adult learner, is making up the new majority in secondary education, creating several implications for community colleges. The average non-traditional student is an adult, age 25 or older, who has returned to school either full-time or part-time. The student must balance school with employment, family, and financial commitments, placing them "at risk," and leaving no time for extracurricular campus activities. The student generally has better grades than younger students, but takes longer to complete their studies. Active approaches to learning are most effective. The non-traditional student needs improvement of basic academic skills, information about job opportunities, decision-making and stress management skills, and identification of individual strengths and abilities. The key to the persistence of non-traditional students is social integration, fostered by faculty members, and creating a sense of kinship. Improved registration, parking, financial aid, networking, accessibility, and information services would be of great benefit. Increased enrollment due to welfare reform and technological advancement is expected, with many of the students being non-traditional. Community colleges must develop a system of efficient and up-to-date training to meet these students' needs. Contains 11 references. (YKH)

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The Non-Traditional Student

Eileen E. Ely

Paper presented at the American Association of Community Colleges Annual Conference
(77th, Anaheim, CA, April 12-15)

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The Non-traditional Student

Eileen E. Ely, Graduate Assistant
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Who am I?

I am your adult student, age 25 and older, who has returned to school either full-time or part-time. While attending school I, also, maintain additional adult life responsibilities such as employment, family, and financial commitments. You may have labeled me as an "adult student," a "re-entry student," a "returning student," "an "adult learner" (Benshoff, 1993, p. 2), or a member of the "new majority." (Martens et al., 1995, p. 5). Furthermore, you many have also labeled me as being "at-risk," possessing "academic, social, and economic problems that challenge. . . [my] success in college - e.g. poor academic history, low self-concepts, limited world views, an absence of role models, family and employment responsibilities, and financial needs (Roueche & Roueche, 1994, p. 3). I am your non-traditional student.

What am I like?

I am described as being "achievement oriented, highly motivated, and relatively independent with special needs for flexible schedules" (Cross, 1980). In general, I "have better grades than younger students, but take longer to complete. . . [my] studies" ("Not Just For Kids," 1997, p. 20). At times, I need instruction appropriate for my specific development level in order to be successful. I enjoy active approaches to learning, such as group discussions, and "value

opportunities to integrate academic learning into. . . life and work experiences" (Benshoff, 1991).

My two largest concerns involve finances and family. Financing an education while maintaining household expenses is extremely difficult and at times overwhelming and stressful. The financial sacrificing has forced me to be extremely consumer oriented, seeing and valuing my education as an investment.

At times, I am guilt ridden attempting to balance my education, my job, my family, and a household. Research indicates that this problem is not gender specific since "both [sexes] have difficulties juggling the roles of student, worker, and family member" (Muench, 1987, p. 10).

Due to my many personal responsibilities and rigid schedule, I have little or no time for extracurricular campus activities. I am basically on campus to attend classes, utilize the library and conduct research. Unless absolutely necessary, you will not see me in student services. I will get my needed information from my instructors, the department secretary if available, other students in my classes, or on a department bulletin board. I see faculty and staff as extensions of student services and value their ability to answer my questions. As an adult student, I see these individuals as my support system and my counseling service. Taking a few moments with me to answer a question, head me in the right direction, or just listening to me vent about a bad day is worth it's weight in gold.

Since I am typically a commuter student, I have an added time loss and added stress due to travel plus the added worries of

transportation expenses. Being a commuter student also makes it difficult for student services to reach me with programs and services.

What are my needs as a non-traditional student?

My primary needs at the point of re-entry include: improved speaking, math, reading, and study skills; learning about job opportunities; developing test taking, decision making and stress management skills; and identifying individual strengths and abilities (Spratt, 1984). Personally speaking, I do not like the term "remedial" and believe it places a negative over-tone on the valuable skill or success building courses. "Remedial" is another label on an individual already lacking self-confidence and fearing failure .

A key to the persistence of non-traditional students at the community college, and I believe at any college, is social integration. "The classroom serves as the primary meeting place and time for all students in a community college" (Allison, 1996, p. 84). A student, no matter what age, needs to feel as if they belong, a kinship. Findings in a recent study confirm the "importance of the classroom in the formation of student peer groups. . . . Conversation and narratives revolve around the classroom as the catalyst for support, friendship and increased learning" (Allison, 1996, p. 89).

Faculty members play a key role in the process of implementing or fostering classroom social integration. Teaching strategies that involve "collaborative learning, group work on class assignments, and the development of study partners" (Allison, 1996, p. 89) are highly endorsed and valued by students. Through classroom social integration students "appear to build a metaphorical support net, weaving one strand at a time from one class, one student, or one

family member. They can then fall back on this net when the occasion calls for support" (Allison, 1996, p. 89).

In recent studies, non-traditional students have made the additional following suggestions: (a) Separate registration, advising, and orientation; (b) improved access and availability to parking; (c) special assistance with financial aid and housing (easy to understand, simplified paperwork); (d) improved information services and communication networks; (e) increased social networking and support; (f) increased and convenient counseling services for adults; (g) increased availability of weekend, evening, and off-campus classes; (h) better preparation of faculty and staff to meet the needs of non-traditional students; (i) availability of child care; and (j) credit consideration for life and work experience. Other services considered important, but are often unavailable to non-traditional students, include health services, and publications for adults (Benshoff, 1993, p. 12-13).

As a non-traditional student, I personally have several additional needs: (1) To be treated like an adult and (2) to receive outstanding "Nordstrom" like customer service. Remember, dissatisfied customers talk with their feet. Walter G. Bumphus (1997), President of Brookhaven College in Farmers Branch, Texas, and the 1996-97 chair of the AACC Board of Directors recently made the following statement that summarizes my feelings about non-traditional student strategies: "Just as it takes a whole village to raise a child, it takes a whole college to recruit students effectively, register them efficiently and retain them successfully" (p. 3).

Implications for today's and tomorrow's community colleges

Brace yourself. Enrollment growth is predicted to "skyrocket in the next few years under the welfare reform package passed by the last Congress. When welfare recipients are required to find employment, they will turn to open-access community colleges for training" (Cvancara, 1997, p. 11). In our rapidly changing society, "global competition and rapid advances in technology" ("Not Just for Kids," 1997, p. 16) are placing increased demands on the community colleges for quick, efficient, and up-to-date training and retraining. Many of the individuals in these programs will be today's and tomorrow's non-traditional students.

I would like to close by saying that the next time you see me I may not look like this. Instead of coming to you as a Native American, I may be Black, Hispanic or Asian. I may be taller or shorter. I may have blond, red, or multi-colored hair. I am your "at-risk student." I personally belief every student that walks through your doors is a potential "at-risk" student. The point is: I will be looking for your help, support and encouragement; I need your help, support and encouragement. Please be there for me and my dreams.

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